

DREAMers Study: Undocumented College Students, Social Exclusion and Psychological Distress

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Background

- In 2008, it was estimated that 11.9 million undocumented immigrants lived in the United States. It is estimated that approximately 18% or 2 million of these individuals are undocumented immigrant children. These undocumented immigrant children are often referred to as the “1.5 generation” by scholars.
- Approximately 7,000 to 13,000 undocumented youth enroll in college throughout the United States each year.
- Despite growing up and receiving primary and secondary (K-12) education in the U.S., many undocumented young adults cannot legally work, vote or drive in most U.S. states, or received federal financial aid for college tuition.
- While some provisions allow undocumented youth to attend primary and secondary schooling, none of these provisions provides a pathway to citizenship – limiting their full participation in society.
- Studies show that fear of deportation/detainment, loneliness, increased anxiety, and depression are central, emotional concerns of undocumented students. These negative social and psychological effects can further limit the ability for undocumented youth to fully participate in society even after receiving an undergraduate degree.



Methods

One-hour one-time, audio-taped open-ended qualitative interviews were conducted either in-person or via phone with undocumented college students who:

- came to the US at age 15 or younger
- attended college as undocumented, remain undocumented
- attended college in Massachusetts or New Jersey
- speak English

Emotional and Informational Support

“It’s impossible to completely forget the stressors, but I cope by being with people that understand me and like know what it’s like ... it’s like being able to cry together, laugh together, providing that space ... we have to continue fighting for my community. I’m going to continue doing what I can to make sure our communities don’t have to suffer that much ... we have a group chat in which we can share things.”

“So it’s less stressful knowing information about the laws ... it’s just that people are scared of what they don’t know and so like, people should get informed, should join groups if they feel the need to. I joined the Student Immigrant Movement.”

Fear of Deportation

“My dad got pulled over once and he had a court date to go to...I went with him to the court and I was paranoid – I thought he would never come out...He thought this was it. I had school that day, my mind was like pre-occupied (in high school, sophomore year). Once I go in who knows what will happen...luckily all we had to do was pay for the flat tire, they didn’t check documents. We were so relieved.”

“Fear of deportation off-campus, fear that families are being separated, fear of people that would know us, know about us.”

Uncertainty of Future/Blocked Opportunities

“There was a point where I was thinking, ‘why am I even trying? I can’t get into college and even if I can I won’t be able to afford it.’ I was also thinking, ‘I don’t want to be a financial burden. They already have bills to pay, my clothes, food. To see how much college costs [I knew they couldn’t afford this].’ During high school I stopped doing my work, I stopped caring. In middle school I got straight As but when I got to high school it all changed. **In the inside, I had so much fear and anger. I felt a lot of hopelessness.**”

“My father always instilled in us the value of education. He has this saying, ‘A que se va la escuela? A aprender, a estudiar, y hacer algo en la vida [translation: What is school for? To learn and study, and to do something in life].’ it didn’t become an issue until high school, I’ve always kind of known that high school would be it for me because of money. I also had preconceived notions that made me think I wasn’t going any further... **I hate seeing the line, “Must be a U.S. citizen.” It was another door being shut in my face.** It made me think that I better make the best of these next four years because that’s all I am going to get.”

Objectives

- To examine how not having legal immigrant status impacts the psychosocial well-being of undocumented college-age students
- To identify what social supports are in place to alleviate psychological stressors associated with not having legal U.S. status

Preliminary Results

Stressors

Preliminary results indicate that undocumented college students experience several life stressors that place them at risk for poor mental health:

- financial insecurities related to paying college tuition,
- stress induced from “navigating the system” on their own,
- feelings of isolation and instances of social sacrifices,
- constantly hiding their ethnic identity and status for fear of being judged, fear of being deported or having everything taken away,
- barriers to developmental milestones (e.g., obtaining, a driver’s license, voting, school and work).

Coping and Help-Seeking

Family support, self-determination, listening to other people’s stories, religion, and music and art are various strategies used to cope with psychological distress.

Mental illness is highly stigmatized in their communities and families limiting the likelihood they would seek help for their psychological distress.

Recommendations

Long-term exposure to psychological distress can have a long-lasting negative impact on overall health and mental health. To mitigate these risks, colleges should:

- Make mental health counseling services more accessible, provide staff trainings on cultural competency and immigration policies, & provide support for the transition from high school to college and beyond
- Provide more social-structural supports (e.g., peer support groups, informational support, financial support)
- Building a sense of community on college campuses; a space where students can be open about their experiences
 - “I believe that a lot of the healing I’ve been having this past months have been through my community right through like us talking with one another.”
- Raise awareness about the presence of undocumented students on campus and the issues they face (e.g., resource guides, outreach and educational events)



Conclusion

“Understand that we didn’t choose this life. I’m still a person and that doesn’t define me...I have the same dreams and goals to go to college that you do...undocumented classmates have grown up immersed in American culture as any citizen and have education in American schools.”

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